

# Covert Repetition

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## 0. Summary

This paper discusses the importance of covertly repeated practice rather than overt repetition in learning, especially extensive reading for learning English as a foreign language at school. Covertly repeated practice will enable the learners to focus on being involved in the tasks while overtly repeated practice may automatize the target expressions but they may not be able to use the expressions in different contexts. Extensive reading is considered to offer covertly repeated practice to the learners properly and to be one of the ideal methods for the learners to acquire an adequate command of English.

## Key words

Covertly repeated learning Dexterity Microslip Affordance Extensive reading

## 1. Introduction

When learners of English language are to learn some target sentences or expressions in class at school, they are given the expressions as a comprehensible input in some suitable tasks and a great deal of repeated practice. They are expected to use them in a real conversation outside the classroom. However, it is not as easy as the teachers expect. Everyone agrees that repeated practice is important for learning in general and this is thought to be true especially for learning languages. There have been numerous ways of repeated practice to learn English as a foreign language or EFL by repetition, but few agree that extensive reading or ER is one of them. The purpose of this paper is to reconsider the repetitive process in ER for EFL and to list ER as one of the idealized methods for the EFL learners to boost their command of English. First we will discuss repetition and dexterity. Second, we will discuss the changing environment around the learners. Third, we will find Microslips in EFL and how we manage it.

## 2. What is repetition?

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines that repetition is the fact of doing or saying

the same thing many times. The question is whether we can do the same thing many times. I. P. Pavlov, the Nobel Prize winner in Physiology and Medicine in 1904, insisted on the importance of repetition for the rooting of combinations of reflexes. However, Nikolai A. Bernstein, the USSR State Prize (the Stalin Prize) winner in 1948, claimed in a very modern way, that repetition does not exist since it can never be repetition of the same thing (Yamamoto, 2005). Bernstein observed a blacksmith's hammering and found that the hammer was not swung in the same way while striking although we think it was. This is the Degrees of Freedom Problem<sup>1</sup>. When you try to repeat the same movement twice or more, those actions will never be the same because each repetition has a unique motor pattern. This is a kind of repetition paradox.

Every teacher and learner would say that repetition in learning a foreign language is indispensable. In EFL learning, drills of writing the spelling of words and sentences are typical ways of practicing through repetition. Reading a story aloud hundreds of times is more effective for learning the words and expressions in the story as well as reading skills than reading it just a few times. There is a successful practitioner of this method called Dr. Hino Nobuyuki, a professor at Osaka University. He read aloud the three junior high school English textbooks authorized by Ministry of Education more than one hundred times with the advice of Prof. Kunihiro Masao, who proposed a unique method of repeated reading aloud patiently called "Shikan<sup>2</sup> Rodoku." Dr. Hino improved his English dramatically<sup>3</sup>.

Simple physical exercises like walking and running seem like numerous repetitions of stepping on the ground, but in actuality, every step is different from all the others. It is almost impossible to step in the same way as before while walking and running. Those acts that seem different from each other could be considered the same and doing these acts could be considered 'repetition' (Yamamoto, 2007). There are a lot of variables surrounding us that will give us different contexts every moment. He claims that learners should consider every act that seems the same as different in repetition and should recognize that every act is done in a context.

Nomura says (2002) learning itself is basically done in a specific domain in everyday life. Learning English does not occur in a laboratory where every condition of the learning environment is controlled. It is almost impossible to control the learning environment as the learners and the teachers expect or wish. Bernstein's approach on dexterity will pioneer a new way to understand the acquisition of skills. The approach tries to explain the structure of sub-skills of the task to be

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<sup>1</sup> The Degrees of Freedom Problem is to control the movement of muscles and joints that need to coordinate when we move in order to achieve a goal of the movement. (Bernstein, 1996)

<sup>2</sup> Shikan means patiently with all one's soul. Prof. Kunihiro created the word Shikan Rodoku, inspired by Shikan Taza (Zen sitting meditation patiently with all one's soul) in Soto Zen.

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Hino mentions his numerous repeated reading aloud practice in his book; "TOEFL De 650 Ten- Watashino Eigo Shugyo (650 Is My TOEFL Score – My English Learning. 1987. Tokyo: Nan'Un Do))

acquired and set up stages to acquire those sub-skills. Bernstein's Level D, Dreyfus and Dreyfus's Stage 5 (1986), and Nomura's Mastery Level (1989) seem to have something in common. They all focus on performers' actions to coordinate their skills to fit the environment surrounding them (Yamamoto, 2005).

### **3. Covert repetition and overt repetition**

When people hear repeated practice, mumbling new words, phrases, or lines in the textbook may come into their head. Or writing them again and again. They try doing so until it is automatized. Such types of repeated practice are categorized into overtly repeated practice (ORP) because the target expressions of repeating are recognized overtly. It may be like chanting out loud in order to quote Buddhist scriptures or copying the passages of the sutras. This type of repetition seems to be a traditional way of learning. Shikan Rodoku, or repeated reading aloud patiently, is one of them.

Most of the learners may think it is necessary, but tend to get bored when they do the same task numerous times and start counting the number. For the learners the ostensible goal of ORP is to finish the number of times set for repetition. The real goal is to automatize the use of the target expressions. The learners are conscious of repeating the target expressions in ORP. ORP seems to make English language learning a subject of memorization in the same way the students memorize the names of countries, famous people and their times, and chemical symbols at school.

In a conversation practice, the learners memorize the model conversation script and play a role of one of the characters. They have to repeat the lines again and again in order to memorize their lines in the script. English recitation contests have been conducted several times in our school. The students recite a passage of famous pieces of speech such as Dr. Martin Luther King's "I have a dream," the commencement speech at Stanford University by Steve Jobs, and the dictator's speech portrayed by Charlie Chaplin in the film the Great Dictator. The students have to repeat the passage again and again before they speak from memory.

On the other hand, some tasks in which the learners do not recognize repetition but repeat the target task many times consequently are categorized into covertly repeated practice (CRP). The learners are immersed in the task and do not think they do repetition. They do not count the number of times they repeat but concentrate on completing the task. They unconsciously repeat the task again and again. The task is the same but there is no target expression because the learners change the way they say in order to complete the task. In CRP, English language learning does not seem a subject of memorizing.

Here is the combination of CRP and ORP: the use of a phrase list and dialogue practices. If the learners repeat the phrases from the top to the bottom in the list again and again, it is ORP. If the learners use the phrase list as a quiz of translation from Japanese to English in pairs, both utter and

Table 1: Two types of repetition

Repetition type	covertly repeated practice (CRP)	overtly repeated practice (ORP)
Ostensible purpose	To complete the task	To reach the goal of repetition set for automatization
Real purpose	To acquire the skills that the task aims at	To automatize the target expressions
Consciousness	Unconscious	Conscious
Target expressions	No	Yes
Situation	Changing	Fixed

listen to the target phrases in the list numerous times during the quiz for a few minutes. The learners can play a fastest finger first by using the list in a group. The more correct answers a learner can get, the better.

In dialogue practices, we can fix a certain target expression but create a lot of different situations so that the dialogues will differ in each situation. Suppose you are asked “What’s your plan this weekends?” Your answer will change according to the person who asks the question to you: your friend, a male classmate you do not often talk with, a female classmate you do not often talk with, your teacher, your family, a person you meet at Mejiro Station but you do not know well, a policeman. The task in which you are asked a question about your plan on weekends is the same, but your reply will differ and the task difficulty will be different among the situations. What matters is what is repeated and how it is repeated when we practice doing something for mastering.

The same context that you meet a word in does not happen again. Only similar contexts may happen or can be created artificially. This is what EFL classes create for the EFL learners.

Dexterity may help us find the best way of using English by reducing the degree of freedom. Experts make the degree of freedom close to minimum in dexterity avoiding superfluous movements and put themselves into flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 2000). In flow, acquisition may happen because the learners devote themselves to language use naturally for a long period of time (Yamamoto, 2011).

#### 4. Ecological approach

EFL learners and teachers tend to think that it is the same act in a fixed situation when they practice a certain target expression repeatedly. However, the environment where the learners are located changes every second. The learners are just one of the agents of action in the circumstances and each action is affected by the changes of the circumstances. The learners cannot create the same environment where they learn to use English even if they want to.

Van Lier (2000) explains about the relationship between language learning and its context on the analogy of the knowledge of the jungle for an animal:

Knowledge of language for a human is like knowledge of the jungle for an animal. The animal does not 'have' the jungle; it knows how to use the jungle and how to live in it. Perhaps we can say by analogy that we do not 'have' or 'possess' language, but that we learn to use it and to 'live in it.'

(van Lier, 2000)

If we apply this jungle analogy for reading, the whole story can be a 'jungle' and readers can be 'animals living in the jungle.' Words can be 'leaves of trees,' 'trunks,' and 'fallen trees.' The words of the story that appear in different contexts give different meanings to the readers.

The environmental factors have been focused on less than the internal factors inside the learners. Actually speaking, however, language learning occurs in the environment surrounding the learners. Mastering a certain expression might not only be an internal matter of the brain but also a matter affected by the environment surrounding the learner (Yamamoto, 2004).

Most words usually have several meanings each of which is used in different scenes. For example, the word *company* is used as a group of friends among intimate people and a business organization in the context of sales and services. The expression *Thank you* has different meanings in different contexts: *Thank you* expresses gratitude in many cases, but you can use *Thank you* when you want to blame others like "Thank you. This is all that you did and it was wrong."

The language learner has been seen as an information processor that receives input from caretakers, teachers and peers, processes this input into intake, and, ultimately, produces output of a measurable kind (Kramsch, 2002). However, Kramsch says that language should be seen as a tool for getting other things done, and the focus should be on the way language practices are organized within members of a community of language users. What language learners receive is not 'input,' but 'affordances'<sup>4</sup>.

The concept of affordance implies the complimentary nature of the creature and the environment. The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill (Gibson 1979). What becomes an affordance depends on what you do, what you want, and what is useful for you (Van Lier, 2000). We are surrounded by things that can offer different affordances to each of us. My son used to play with the lid of the bucket. We gave him the bucket with the lid in order for him to house his toys such as tops, marbles, and wooden blocks there. One day he started to play with the lid by spinning it, which we had not expected. However the lid of the bucket does not change at all. Affordances just exist. Some of them can be taken by some of us in a certain context, but they cannot by the same persons in different contexts. It depends

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<sup>4</sup> Affordance is a term coined by James J. Gibson in the late 1970s.

on perceivers and the contexts whether affordances can afford something to the perceivers. He tried spinning the lid wherever he went. He also tried spinning other lids and even spinning the bucket. He improved his spinning skills with CRP.

### 5. A bridge between class and real-life setting

Here are the three types of knowledge based on expert study and educational psychology. The EFL learners could be divided into those three categories (Table 2):

The learners of the (1) group are categorized into the typical Japanese learners of English. Group (1) learners have declarative knowledge through conscious learning. In this group, knowledge is explicitly learned. The learners are to have a large vocabulary and deep grammatical knowledge.

In Group (2) the learners will be trained in a manner of “communicative approach” in English lessons. The learners practice speaking and writing English a lot in class, but they feel difficulty in using English outside the classroom. They are called routine experts. They can use English in limited contexts that are similar to the one where they learned English. They increase their procedural knowledge.

In the (3) group the learners are in the highest rank, experts of English. They have a good command of English and can use English fluently even in a new place and with a new talker. This type of knowledge they acquire through unconscious learning is called adaptive knowledge. Their knowledge is improved implicitly. The learners in Group (3) can use such knowledge fluently with confidence in new contexts.

The largest difference between Group (2) and Group (3) is the degree of readiness toward new contexts and the degree of consciousness toward the environment surrounding the learners. Those learners who have (2) knowledge may be trained implicitly so that they can use the target expressions automatically. However, they may not be ready for changes of environment surrounding them although they learned English in class repeatedly. The learners in Group 3 are conscious of the

Table 2: Types of knowledge, expert, learning, and use (Yamamoto, 2012. Modified)

Group	(1)	(2)	(3)
Learners	I thought I learned it but cannot use it well.	I thought I learned it but cannot use it properly in a new context.	I can use it properly in a new context.
Knowledge type 1	declarative knowledge	procedural knowledge	conceptual knowledge
Knowledge type 2	knowing <i>that</i>	knowing <i>how</i>	
Types of expert	inexpert	routine expert	adaptive expert
Conscious	conscious learning	unconscious learning and automaticity in the fixed context	unconscious learning and automaticity in different contexts
Explicit /implicit	explicit knowledge	implicit knowledge in the fixed context	implicit knowledge in different contexts

change of the environment, and are able to deal with a new environment. CRP is categorized into Group (2) while ORP is in Group (3).

## 6. Microslip

When the environment where they learned the word is different from the one where they try to use it, it will be difficult for them to recall the meaning smoothly. It happens. Even when we think we set up the same context in language use, the context will be different because the environment is always changing.

We need to adjust the knowledge and experiences that we learned before to the new situation. Microslips occur in such situations. The more different the situation is from the one where they learned the word or expression, the more microslips they have when they use it.

Reed and Shoenherr (1992; Suzuki, 2001) observed a process of making coffee on the table and found microslips as a sequence of minor corrections of hand movements. They identified four different types of microslips; hesitation, trajectory change, meaningless touch, and hand shape change.

If we put the concept of microslip in an EFL context, we may make a good explanation of the reason why we have difficulty in using certain expressions we believe we 'know,' and of the reason why we can use the target expressions more fluently if we have enough repetition practice, if we have almost the same situation as we learned the expressions, and if we use chunks.

It is probable that a different context surrounding you will affect you when you recall a target word. The more different the contexts you have, the more microslips can occur. It is better to seek a way to learn words or expressions in order to reduce microslips. There are three possible ways to decrease such microslips (Yamamoto, 2004): to modify the environment surrounding you for recalling, to have more repetition practices, and to unify subtasks into one.

In the first one, to modify the environment surrounding you for recalling, you make the environment around you easier to recall the target word. The transformation of objects in EFL is like changing a difficult expression into an easier one.

In the second way to decrease microslips, to have more repetition practices, we need to rehearse the target expressions. It may work more effectively if you consciously rehearse the practice in order to automatize the sub-tasks of one task and when we move from one sub-task to the next one, there is likely to be a microslip.

In the third way to decrease microslips, to unify subtasks into one, you read the passage 'So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future.'<sup>5</sup> word by word like 'So – you –

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<sup>5</sup> From Steve Jobs' commencement speech at Stanford University

have – to – trust – that – the – dots – will – somehow – connect – in – your – future,’ and it may be difficult to remember the sentence. If you read the words ‘So you have to trust,’ ‘that the dots will somehow connect,’ and ‘in your future’ just as chunks, it will be much easier.

The task design in Ecological approach may help the learners to develop abilities of adjusting themselves to microslips that will happen in those changing circumstances. If the learners focus on some differences in the circumstances where they are located when they use English as the target language, it may help the learners to adjust themselves to a real situation different from the classroom (Yamamoto, 2012). If you add or change one condition to the same task, it will change greatly. The Plus-one Dialogue created by Ito Yuji<sup>6</sup> and pair-work with partner-change like a folk dance are leading examples of microslip-conscious activity. We can find repetition in extensive reading as well.

## 7. Context dependent memory

Suppose you are reading a newspaper in the living room, and you want to cut out an article. However, you realize that you don’t have a pair of scissors at hand, but there is a pair in the kitchen. So you go to the kitchen to get the scissors. But you get distracted when you enter the kitchen. When you snap back to reality, you have forgotten the reason why you came to the kitchen, and so you go back to the living room. As soon as you get back to the living room, you remember that you were trying to get a pair of scissors. This is a typical anecdotal example of context-dependent memory in daily life (Isarida & Isarida, 2014).

Godden & Baddeley (1975; Takano, 1995) and Isarida & Isarida (1999) explored the effects of contextual changes by comparing the recall rate of words which were learned in one context and were recalled in another one. Godden & Baddeley examined how many words the subjects recalled the words on the land or under water after learning those words on the land. They also tried the other way round. The results show that different contexts might reduce the recall of words. Isarida & Isarida conducted three more naturalistic experiments for the investigation of the context-dependent memory induced by contextual changes between class and intermission. The results showed clear context-dependent memory.

Repetition practices in different contexts may facilitate decontextualization, in which episodic memory is transferred into semantic memory (Smith, 1988; Isarida & Isarida, 1999). When you decontextualize the target expression, you reach the level of utilizing it. The knowledge is leveled

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<sup>6</sup> In Plus-one Dialogue the learners are to add one sentence to the dialogue given by the teacher so that the dialogue will be given a sense of reality. The demonstration of Plus-one Dialogue can be seen in the video of the JLC on Demand. (<https://www.jlc-ondemand.com/videos/detail/E07-1A/>)



up to conceptual knowledge in Table 2.

Debate would be one of the ideal methods of repeated practice in acquiring a good command of English. While you read a lot of articles and papers on one topic, prepare for some presentations by analyzing the articles and papers, listen to the presentations of the counterpart, and ask and answer Q&As, you read, listen to, and speak a number of large words many times consequently.

When you do not have any partners for debating, you can debate by yourself through reading and writing. First, you read some articles on some topic. Next you analyze the articles with pro & con, and choose one side. Then you list up some good points and think of their reasons you believe so. You also list up some weak points and think of how to defend them. This is how we write academic papers.

Excellent teachers set various types of covertly repeated practice in their lessons without letting their students recognize this. The students are absorbed in the task given in class and practice the target expressions numerous times consequently. The Plus-one Dialogue by Ito Yuji is an excellent example. You can find the students do numerous CRP in one lesson if you watch the lesson videos by excellent teachers such as Ebisu Miyuki in Hiroshima<sup>7</sup>.

## 8. Extensive Reading

Most learners and teachers tend to have an image that they could enlarge their vocabulary if they read English books extensively. However, many researchers have denied it because big words do not often appear in a book. The words like *persistence* and *resilience* do not frequently appear except when the topic is *grit*. It would be better to use a word list if you want to increase your vocabulary size.

The frequency of words appearing in the book is still important as repeated practice in ER. Basic vocabulary such as demonstrative pronouns, personal pronouns, and articles appear hundreds of times in one story. Be-verbs and basic verbs such as *have*, *take*, and *get* appear quite frequently, too. The EFL learners are expected to meet those English words in different contexts and to cultivate a sense of using basic vocabulary, which must be very important for the learners to have a good command of English. We need to wait for empirical research to prove the efficiency of ER for cultivation of a sense of using basic vocabulary.

You can find another dimension of repetition in ER though it doesn't look as if it has this aspect. That dimension of 'repetition' is to transfer the forms of English to their meanings in every line in ER in EFL while the readers read a book. This repeated practice will enhance the readers' English abilities and may enable us to develop the English input-output channel in the modified Iceberg

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<sup>7</sup> Ms. Ebisu is a teacher of English at a public junior high school in Hiroshima.

Theory (Yamamoto, 2012).

It is true that we can develop the channel by reading the same passages hundreds of times, but such a way of learning forces the learners to stick out the monotonous repetition. In addition, just reading the same passage hundreds of times has few different contexts, which will not build the capacities of using English to respond to different contexts in real life. By contrast, ER will attract the readers and guide them to the world of the books to the end as long as the readers follow the three rules of ER: Do not use dictionaries, skip the line you don't understand, and stop reading if you get bored (Sakai and Kanda, 2005).

The history of ER as one of the most effective ways of learning English is long in Japan. Natsume Soseki (1906), once an instructor of English at Gakushuin, mentioned it about 100 years ago:

Read as many English books as possible. Skip over some minor parts unfamiliar to you. You will find out the meanings of them if you keep reading to the end. (Natsume Soseki, 1906: translated by Yamamoto, 2004)

Harold. E. Palmer, another former Gakushuin instructor, who is famous for introducing the 'Oral Method' to Japan, emphasized not only in intensive reading but also extensive reading:

Reading may be intensive and extensive. In the former case, each sentence is subjected to a careful scrutiny, and the more interesting it may be paraphrased, translated, or learnt by heart. In the latter case book after book will be read through without giving more than a superficial and passing attention to the lexicological units of which it is composed. (Harold. E. Palmer, 1917: 205)

Farrier (1991) believes an ER program in Japan should be introduced not only at the college level but at all levels. In this way, ER has long been thought a fruitful approach to enhance reading ability, though only a limited number of teachers have tried to introduce ER to their schools. It is partly because there is no subject like an ER course for English at high school in the Course of Study set by the MEXT. There are no ER books authorized by MEXT.

ER is one of the best ways of CRP to become a good command of English because it enables the learners to repeat transforming the form of English into its meaning through following the storyline numerously and without notice. You do read English books individually, so you do not need any partners.

In addition to that, you can improve your reading stamina in EFL while you read English books extensively (Yamamoto, 2008). Reading stamina is a new concept of reading skill that has not been perceived and discussed well in the second language acquisition field as well as in the first language

acquisition field. Reading stamina is defined as a reading skill that enables us to read a whole book or a number of passages continuously in one block of time, not a few paragraphs or a few passages. The target length of reading time would be half an hour or more. Quite a few EFL learners tend to lose concentration easily somewhere along the way when they try to read English for such a 'long' time because they have not experienced reading for that length of time in their regular English reading class.

In order to acquire reading stamina, it is quite important to choose a right book in order to keep reading it; the success depends on book selection. You have to keep reading English books for a long period of time and transfer textual information into semantic information numerous times. You will be in a state of *flow* in ER English books extensively if you select the right level of English books on the basis of your reading stamina in addition to attractiveness for you, and then you will develop your reading stamina gradually. If you take thick books, you will run out of reading stamina easily (Yamamoto, 2012). The difficulty level of reading is theoretically close to 'i' of 'i+1,' which Krashen (1985) proposes, but Day (1998) prefers to use it 'i-1' in the ER context.

## 9. Conclusion

Overtly repeated practice has been a major repetition way for the learners to automatize the target expressions in EFL. ORP seems to make us think that English language learning is a subject of memorization.

However, if you closely observe the learning environment surrounding the learners, you will realize the circumstances change every second. When the language learners want to use what they have learned by repetition in class, they will find it difficult to use it because the situation will be different from the one where they learned it. The learners need to adjust the language skills to those changing circumstances. If you add or change one condition to the same task in EFL, the learners think about the change consciously and try to modify their acts.

ER may serve as such an ideal setting for acquiring English in the EFL class because ER makes the learners repeat numerous times and unconsciously the task of transforming the form of English into the meaning spontaneously when they are absorbed in following the storyline while reading. You can do it by yourself: You do not have to be in class and there is no need to have a partner to practice English conversation.

The definitions of CRP and ORP are introduced in this paper, but we are still halfway to defining overtly repeated practice and covertly repeated practice. The QA pair work activity with the phrase list and reading a passage hundreds of times seem to be categorized into ORP but actually they are CRP because the learners do not care about repetition while they are doing so. However, we need to wait for some trustable empirical data to support the idea that covertly repeated practice is better

than overtly repeated practice.

There are two big good points of CRP. One is that the learners would repeat the task in CRP more positively in a more joyful manner once they are absorbed in the activity of the task. Repetition is numerously done before the learners reach the goal of the task. Another good point is that the learners would not think that learning English is just a subject of monotonous memorization. Learning English should be creative and evolving because language is creative and evolving.

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